

Better Gifts to Come

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/3885004) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/3885004>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Kill la Kill
Relationship:	Kiryuuin Satsuki/Matoi Ryuuko
Characters:	Matoi Ryuuko , Kiryuuin Satsuki , Kiryuuin Soichiro Matoi Isshin
Additional Tags:	Birthday , Birthday Presents , Secrets , Innuendo
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2015-05-06 Words: 3,369 Chapters: 1/1

Better Gifts to Come

by [CalicoCat](#)

Summary

What do you get the sister who has everything?

Notes

Why might Satsuki's birthday be in May?

Though there's been no official confirmation of this, there's a suspicion that Satsuki's birthday is in May because 皐月 has an (archaic) meaning of "The Fifth Month" (五月, which is more obviously "5th month" can also be read as "Satsuki").

Workmen had placed a thick sheet of metal over the hole, in amongst the crumbling walls and broken ribcage of charred timbers. It had taken a small crane and some coordinated shouting to guide it into place, but the girl had picked it up carelessly and without effort, and had slid it to one side as though she were just sliding paper across a desk.

So now light filtered down into the subterranean space for the first time in months, illuminating the dust suspended and dancing at the opening, making a spotlight for the little stage below and highlighting a lone protagonist.

She'd been having weird flashback dreams for about a week, had Ryuko Matoi: odd memories of sleeping on the couch under a blanket when she was little more than a baby, things she ought not to have been able to recall at all. It had made her nostalgic, which wasn't a common feeling for her, but it wasn't bad to look back a little, even while she was looking forward to her sister's birthday at the end of the week.

Satsuki, though, wasn't easy to buy for. She bought her own clothes – which oscillated between the intimidatingly smart for work, and the strangely plain for personal use – and her hobbies seemed to consist solely of studying and martial arts. “Putting down her sword” seemed to have been – what would she say? Simile? Metaphor? – whatever the term was when you said something that was kind of true, but also wasn't. Not quite a lie, but more like those annoying daggered statements in adverts – “Sis will put down her sword”† †Actual sword may not be put down. Piece by piece – patiently, calmly, even kindly – she was reassembling the conglomerate into something more wholesome, and there was no indication that she intended to take over her university (despite Nonon's none-too-subtle suggestions that she should). But at the same time, at weekends and evenings Ryuko would often hear the creak as the floor of the estate's *dojo* flexed and rebounded, and she'd find Satsuki there – repeating complex sequences of moves, armed and unarmed, over and over: each one equally, lethally fluid. A few were familiar, some she was sure she'd even been on the receiving end of, and there was one in particular that Satsuki repeated time and time again, but in that space Ryuko became the obedient little sister for once, and would just sit cross-legged at the side of the hall as ancient weapons made blinding trails in evening sunlight, and feet and hands pulverized boards to clouds of splinters.

That's where Ryuko had realized it – Satsuki had a lot of things, but there was something she was missing that most people took for granted. Ryuko couldn't see it directly, but she could sense its silhouette and the shape of its absence. The empty picture frames. The bedroom shelves of dry textbooks. The wooden toy box in the closet that only contained cobwebs.

Satsuki didn't have a childhood. Or if she'd ever had one, it had long ago burnt up in a wreck on a mountain roadside.

Ryuko couldn't wind back time, of course, but there was the faintest of chances that she could make a piece of her own past into a present for her sister. She could share a little of her early life, such as it was, with Satsuki; and then she'd had the dream and remembered the toys that had stood guard round her bed and kept her safe at night. She'd give Satsuki one of those, and give her a little piece of a normal (hah!) childhood with it. Fake memories of better years. A little theatre where they'd grown up together and had only fought over favorite toys.

That was the idea. And just like all Ryuko's best ideas it was clearly an impossibility, because all her childhood possessions had been turned to ash in the inferno that had claimed the Matoi mansion, hadn't they?

Hadn't they?

She had a memory: trivial, inconsequential. It seemed to have been fastened in some gentle way to the recent dream of her childhood, pulled by it to the front of her mind. She'd been in the lounge, listening to music or watching TV – in any case clearly not studying – and Isshin had shuffled by the door, stooped even further than usual by a large plastic box.

“You're too old for these. I'm putting them in the basement.”

She'd grunted some sort of acknowledgement and her attention had returned to the guitar solo or the bone-crushing fight scene playing out on the screen before her. The basement. The one place in the house she was forbidden to enter.

DANGER

NO ENTRY

That means you, Ryuko!

At any other time, a prohibition of that kind would have been an irresistible invitation, but she had a nagging suspicion that this was all a carefully-crafted double-bluff on her dad's part. Trying to lure her into his domain, to become fascinated by science or whatever other weirdness he devoted his time to. Ryuko Matoi wasn't an idiot though. She'd seen through his little ruse. No life of lab-coats and stuffy academia for her: no way, no how. So she'd studiously ignored the thread that led further into the labyrinth, turned back towards the surface, and in time the box and the toys had been forgotten.

Ryuko crouched and ran her fingers through the dust on the floor of the underground lab. Mikisugi and Kinagase had been thorough: there wasn't a scrap of paper, or a single frayed thread left of her dad's research. It didn't make sense that Isshin would have brought the box of toys down here, though. Everything unwanted, or unneeded – if it wasn't thrown out – was put up in the attic. Everything unwanted, or unneeded, was now only smoke or carbon black stains on the trunks of the trees around the ruins. And she'd seen the inventory that Nudist Beach had taken of the vault beneath the house, even if they'd kept the items themselves from her: computers, lab equipment, but not a child's toys. No sign of P-chan or Kuma: both members of the soft toy regiment still considered Missing in Action.

She rolled her fingers impatiently on the concrete.

You always were a thorough old coot, I'll give you that. Where'd ya hide 'em, Dad?

She tapped her fingers on the ground again, and pulled a face. Then moved to the left and tapped again. To the right, forwards and backwards. A few meters in each direction. She straightened up and smiled at no one in particular.

Good one, Dad. How far down did ya put it? Ten meters? Far enough that you'd need a pretty big bomb to reach it, I bet. What was it meant to be? A bunker? A panic room?

She slipped off her Sukajan and folded it carefully at the side of the room. Ryuko cracked her knuckles purposefully, and allowed herself a lopsided grin.

Been a while since I took it up over nine thousand.

She wandered back to the center of the room and took a deep breath. That first pile driver impact from her fist sent cracks out five meters around her: a little seismic event that registered ever so slightly on chart recorders in earthquake research labs in the distant city, making researchers start from their coffees for a moment. Two more blows and a large chunk of reinforced concrete came free; she flicked it up and around, allowing it to spin for a moment on a raised fingertip before tossing it into the corner. She was getting the hang of it now, swinging her fists in a smooth, irresistible rhythm, just as she did when Satsuki held the punch bag for her in the gym. Within a few minutes she was completely below the level of the floor, a rough-walled conical chasm opening up around her.

The patch of light above had moved across the hole, following the path of the sun, but the hazy light was still sufficient to see by. Ryuko stopped for a moment, put her hands behind her head, and stretched off, feeling her spine click into a more comfortable, customary position. At her feet powdered concrete was beginning to flow downwards, disappearing into a small hole in which could be seen only darkness. Far above she could see a sky of blue and milky white – fragments of clouds and the contrails of a plane heading towards the city. She was covered in grey-white concrete dust: on her arms, on her face, her clothes, in her hair. Even the red of her fringe was now more a dusty pink. She licked her finger and drew it down across her mouth, marking a line of brighter red like lipstick. Chuckling, she struck a caricature of the only pose she could remember from the *kabuki* she'd once seen on TV.

Good thing no one can see me, right?

Ryuko shook her head and let the powder scatter on her shoulders, and then, with a look of satisfaction, drove herself downwards, smashing her forearm across the lowest point of the pit she'd made. The remaining concrete fell away, dropping her into the darkness beneath. There was a moment of panic, as she realized she had no idea how deep the cavern she'd intruded into was, and then she sensed the approaching floor. It wasn't a graceful landing, more sack-of-potatoes than cat-like, but it was effective enough.

She was in a little column of light from above, undefined space around her. The flash of her smartphone made a workable torch, illuminating the secret room in harsh white and greyscale; she stepped carefully over the fragments of fallen concrete, moving between boxes and crates: some open and empty, others sealed shut. There was a momentary flash of reflected light, and when she swung her makeshift torch back again she found a worn, familiar face down on the floor, glass eyes watching her expectantly.

“Hey, Kuma...”

She couldn't help but smile; the little bear seemed equally happy to see her.

“What about the other half of your double act...?”

She tilted the torch upwards and the light projected a giant shadow of a familiar shape. The little pig was resting at the summit of a stack of boxes, one button eye still dangling forlornly where she'd pulled it slightly loose during an enthusiastic embrace, more than ten years ago.

“Gotta new mission for ya, P-chan. Someone else for you to look after. You up for it?”

The fabric was as threadbare as she remembered, the stitching just as loose. Given her dad's skill with fabrics, he could at least have made some repairs before putting the toy down here. She tutted a little under her breath, but it wasn't really a problem – she'd hand P-chan over to Shiro first, and under his skilled fingers the little pig would soon be restored to the pinnacle of porcine perfection.

She picked up the toy gently.

“Long time no s...”

There was a small square of paper stuck to the box beneath her childhood treasure. She scanned the light from her phone across it briefly, and then stepped sharply back – surprised and confused. From his place at the bottom of the stack of boxes, Kuma looked up at her sagely.

“What the hell...!”

Ryuko turned her blindfolded sister smartly through near-enough 720 degrees, and then pushed her down the passageway.

“Bet you're completely lost now, ain't cha?”

A set of pipes crossed the passage here, inconveniently at head height, but despite the black and grey scarf across her eyes, Satsuki ducked down beneath them, and it was Ryuko who was almost cracked across the crown of the head.

“We're beneath the library.”

“How'd ya...?”

Satsuki walked confidently forward, seemingly as certain of the route as her sister was.

“I taught myself to negotiate the mansion blindfold when I was young. In case I were blinded.”

Ryuko stared for a moment.

“Wow, Sis. You’re pretty screwed up, ya know that?”

Satsuki took Ryuko’s hand from where it rested against the small of her back and squeezed it gently.

“And I can lip-read passably well, and tie my shoelaces with one hand.”

Ryuko looked down at the scruffy white of her trainers and their Velcro fastenings.

“I should ask ya about that.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

They walked in silence a little way further.

“So. How’re ya enjoying the birthday mystery tour?”

They’d traversed most of the estate that afternoon, crisscrossing it through underground tunnels and service passages, a new gift revealed at each stopping point.

“The massaging wand was particularly considerate of you...”

Satsuki couldn’t see the conspiratorial grin growing on Ryuko’s face.

“...But quite unnecessary. I’m perfectly able to take care of myself.”

Ryuko pulled back and stared again.

“You are?”

“Muscular aches and strains are easily avoided with a vigorous program of intensive stretching prior to any physical activity.”

Satsuki strode forward, slipping deftly past obstructions.

“Uhh... It’s got other uses.”

“It has? You must enlighten me.”

Oh no... I’m not gonna have to explain it, am I?

Ryuko’s little joke was collapsing spectacularly and catastrophically. She and Mako had laughed themselves silly at the idea of giving Satsuki the “massager”, so much so that they’d been forcibly ejected from the backstreet store in Shinjuku. And there’d been a little wager then – a hundred Yen from Ryuko saying that her sister would blush, and an equally confident assertion from Mako that Satsuki wouldn’t even know what the object was, or that she’d take it blandly at face value. At this point, though, having to hand over some cash to her friend was an entirely secondary consideration to the unexpected and unwelcome obligation to explain exactly how the gift could be used.

“Well... Y’know... Sometimes you might be feelin’ a bit... frustrated.”

“Ah... You mean after a difficult meeting. Challenges establishing a new partnership. That kind of thing.”

It was slender, but it was a straw worth grasping at.

“Exaaaaaaaaaaaaaactly... Well, then it can put a smile on your face.”

“It can? So it's a joke or novelty item, then. Perhaps it lights up or makes a humorous noise.”

Ryuko seemed to have something caught in her throat, and choked briefly.

“Y'know what? Nonon should be able to send ya some links. Actually, I'm certain she's got some links stashed away.”

“No, no.” Satsuki was strangely adamant. “I couldn't bear the shame of having my lack of worldliness exposed to my closest friends.”

She was now a few steps ahead of Ryuko, not even bothering to keep her hand on the wall to check the route.

“This is something that should stay between sisters, don't you agree? I'm sure if you provide a demonstration I'll pick up the basic principles in no time at all.”

Ryuko swallowed hard. She was trying to retain her composure, but her cheeks were turning life fiber red, her hybrid body relishing a rare opportunity for an embarrassing rebellion. The water pipes above them suddenly rattled and thumped alarmingly, masking, almost completely, a sound like a little chuckle.

“It seems you both owe me one hundred Yen.”

“What was that, Sis?”

“Nothing... Nothing...”

Satsuki slowed and let Ryuko catch up with her. The passage branched here, and it wasn't clear which path her sister intended her to take. She relaxed as she felt Ryuko's hands on her back once again, and let herself be steered to the left. Though it was only early May the temperature and humidity in the grounds was already uncomfortable, bordering on unbearable, and some of the rooms in the mansion were now better suited for use as greenhouses, not habitation. However the underground passages were always temperate – warm in winter, cool in summer – and the soft darkness behind the scarf, that masked the chaos of pipes and electrical conduit, the rough walls and cracked tiles, improved them further. Just coming down here again, after so many years, had a pleasant nostalgia all its own. She felt Ryuko move a little closer.

“You miss it, don't ya? Bakuzan.”

Satsuki was silent for a moment as she stepped over a loose tile in the uneven flooring.

“I have the Masamune from the family archives.” She flexed her fingers for a moment, as though she were remembering the feel of the sword in her hand. “It’s not the same, but it is beautiful in its own way.”

Ryuko pushed her forward gently.

“But you don’t have anything else from Dad, do ya? Nothin’ else from when you were a kid.”

They were at the entrance to a small storeroom now, and Satsuki placed a hand on the door frame as though she were steadying herself for a moment.

“No. Nothing else remains.” Ryuko saw Satsuki’s chest fall slightly, her shoulders slump for a moment, but it was impossible to tell whether it was a sigh or just a simple breath. “Mother didn’t believe in... frivolities. Toys and the like.”

She straightened herself up again.

“But there’s still one thing that Father left me.”

Satsuki turned to face her sister, and despite the blindfold Ryuko could feel the blue eyes looking down at her.

“He left me you.”

Ryuko punched her lightly on the stomach.

“C’mon, c’mon. Stop it. You’re makin’ me blush.”

“That seems to be a particular talent of mine.”

Even though she was sure she couldn’t be seen, Ryuko tried to suppress the smile. *D’you have to be good at everything, Sis?* But her pride threw up a wall of bravado that prevented the words from leaking out.

“Well – don’t go spreadin’ that around. I’ve got a reputation to think of.”

“Of course.”

Ryuko turned her sister back through one-eighty, pulling off the blindfold as she did so.

“Last gift, Sis. There ya go.”

Satsuki blinked for a moment as her eyes adjusted to the light. There was a simple workbench, a box resting atop it. And on top of the box was a soft toy – pink – a rough approximation of a pig, worn and well-loved.

“That’s P-chan, Satsuki. He used to look after me when I was a kid. So now he can look after you, when I’m away. I know he’s a bit ragged, but he’s stuffed with good memories.” She mock-scowled for a moment. “Just no dressing him up in human clothes, 'K? I know about that weird kink of yours.”

Satsuki wandered over to the toy and placed a hand on it, feeling the age of the fabric.

“Thank you, Ryuko. I never had such a thing. It’s a wonderful gift.”

“Gift? P-chan? Nah, he’s not your gift. P-chan’s just on loan to you.” Ryuko folded her arms with a grin and leant against the doorframe. “He’s sittin’ on your birthday present.”

The box was long and slender, and ominously familiar. Satsuki felt her heart sink.

“You haven’t bought me a guitar, have you?”

Ryuko snorted.

“It’s not a guitar, you dummy.” Her eyes widened wickedly. “Though what a *fantastic* idea that is. Take a better look.”

Satsuki lifted the toy carefully, revealing a square of paper beneath it, two inches on a side. The yellow of the post-it had faded almost completely to white, but the black ink had only aged to a deep blue and was still clear and legible. The handwriting was immediately familiar, even though it was the first time Satsuki had seen it in more than a decade.

For Satsuki.

There was a small metal plate beneath, laser-engraved precisely with three characters. She heard Ryuko's voice behind her, and as her sister spoke Satsuki felt an unusual resonance in the words, vibrating in the pipes that framed the room: a deeper, older voice that might just have been Senketsu. And if she allowed herself to suspend rationality for a moment, she could almost convince herself that she could hear her father – just for a brief moment, nothing longer. She closed her eyes and touched her fingers to the case, and let the sound echo away to the near silence of distant machinery in the kitchens and the birdsong in the gardens above them.

“Happy birthday, Satsuki.”

双縛斬

Twin Bakuzan

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